

NICE HAT!

5 Enigmas in the Life of Cambodia

a documentary feature film

SYNOPSIS

What does it mean when the royal crown has gone missing or when a single scarf serves both torture and joy? Why would a lowly palm hat tell of ethnic division, or a cloth cap from another country define a revolution? How could a dancer's headdress survive 800 years? In this story, Khmer hats thread together the last ten centuries with the last ten minutes. The eclectic Cambodians who guide us through this world of hats unfold astounding relationships between history, person, country and planet -- revealing great complexity by the simplest of means. Stitching this vision together are the hats themselves. Not only do they frame the Cambodian face in vivid colors, but they move! On heads, in stacks, by 'moto', truck and boat, in exotic dances -- and even on the wind. It's all in a '*Nice Hat!*'

BIO of director/producer DAVID BRISBIN

David Brisbin is best known as a feature film production designer, having designed movies for such directors as Jane Campion, Scott Frank, and Gus Van Sant. He initially studied architecture (*BFA-Arch./Rice University*) and served an internship under the prominent American architect Robert Venturi. Brisbin studied filmmaking (*MFA/California Institute of the Arts*) under the late British director, Alexander Mackendrick. He subsequently received the Henry Luce Scholars Grant under which he worked in Manila as a television reporter covering the fall of Marcos and the rise of Corazon Aquino. His first short documentaries were made for GMA News in the Philippines. He has written several screenplays, as of yet un-produced, though his script about the American abolitionist, John Brown, has been optioned. He also teaches design periodically at the Hong Kong Academy of Performing Arts. "*Nice Hat!*" is his first feature length documentary.

Brisbin's first extensive encounter with Cambodia was as a reporter covering Cambodian refugees inside the Thai border in 1987 when Cambodia was still a closed country. Since the opening of the borders in the early 90's there has been a renaissance within Cambodia of scholarship on their history and culture. It is this renaissance that Brisbin has tracked and researched over multiple trips to Cambodia, and it is the members of the new wave of Khmer cultural awareness whom Brisbin was privileged to interview -- and who are among the key subjects of *Nice Hat!*

PROJECT DETAILS

Running Time: **86 mins** **Colour and B+W** **shot on digital video**

Languages: **English, French & Khmer w/ English subtitles**

FILMOGRAPHY of director/producer DAVID BRISBIN

- NICE HAT!***documentary feature* ...**Producer, Editor, Director**
DOCUMENTARY ABOUT CAMBODIAN HISTORY AND CULTURE (INCLUDING INTERVIEW W/ RITHY PAN)
- PASSENGERS** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY RODRIGO GARCIA, SONY/MANDATE, (ANNE HATHAWAY, PATRICK WILSON)
- THE LOOKOUT** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY SCOTT FRANK, SPYGLASS/MIRAMAX, (JOSEPH GORDON-LEVITT, JEFF DANIELS)
- THE EXORCISM OF EMILY ROSE**..... **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY SCOTT DERRICKSON, SONY/LAKESHORE, (LAURA LINNEY, TOM WILKINSON)
- IN THE CUT** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY JANE CAMPION, PATHE, (MEG RYAN & MARK RUFALO)
- CITY OF GHOSTS** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY MATT DILLON, MGM-UA, (JAMES CAAN, GERARD DEPARDIEU, STELLAN SKARSGARD)
- SNOW WHITE** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY CAROLINE THOMPSON, HALLMARK, (KRISTIN KREUK, MIRANDA RICHARDSON)
- SLIPPED A MICKEY** *feature film in development...* **Writer, Director**
POLITICAL SATIRE, AWARDED DEVELOPMENT FUNDING BY BRITISH COLUMBIA FILM
- BEAUTIFUL JOE** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY STEPHEN METCALFE, CAPITAL FILMS, (SHARON STONE)
- THE CORRUPTOR** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY JAMES FOLEY, NEW LINE, (CHOW YUN FAT, MARK WAHLBERG)
- MAD JOHN BROWN** *feature film in development...* **Writer, Director**
OPTIONED STORY OF AMERICAN ABOLITIONIST, JOHN BROWN, WHO WAS HUNG IN 1859
- SHAKESPEARE'S SISTER (a.k.a. THE PROPOSITION)** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY LESLI GLATTER, INTERSCOPE, (WILLIAM HURT, KENNETH BRANAGH)
- THE CHAMBER** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY JAMES FOLEY, UNIVERSAL, (GENE HACKMAN, CHRIS O' DONNELL)
- DEAD PRESIDENTS** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED AND PROD. BY THE HUGHES BROTHERS, CARAVAN, (LARENZ TATE, KEITH DAVID)
- MAD LOVE** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY ANTONIA BIRD, BUENA VISTA, (DREW BARRYMORE, CHRIS O'DONNELL)
- A DANGEROUS WOMAN** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY STEPHEN GYLLENHALLE, AMBLIN, (DEBORAH WINGER, BARBARA HERSHEY)
- RUBY** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY JOHN MACKENZIE, PROPAGANDA, (DAVID DUCHOVNEY, DANNY AIELLO)
- MY OWN PRIVATE IDAHO** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY GUS VAN SANT, NEW LINE, (RIVER PHOENIX, KEANU REEVES)
- CROOKED HEARTS** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY MICHAEL BORTMAN, MGM, (JULIET LEWIS, NOAH WYLIE, PETER BERG)
- AFTER DARK, MY SWEET** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY JAMES FOLEY, AVENUE, (JASON PATRIC, RACHEL WARD)
- DRUGSTORE COWBOY** **Production Designer**
DIRECTED BY GUS VAN SANT, AVENUE, (HEATHER GRAHAM, MATT DILLON, JAMES LEGROS)
- ELECTRONIC REVOLUTION of the Philippines** *short doc...* **Writer, Director**
DOCUMENTARY ABOUT THE COLLAPSE OF THE MARCOS REGIME, FOR GMA NEWS MANILA
- HOW CLEAN IS CLEAN** *short doc...* **Writer, Director**
DOCU. ABOUT ELECTION ANOMALIES , FOR CHANNEL GMA NEWS, CENSORED BY MARCOS REGIME

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KEY INTERVIEWS

Rithy Panh, Cambodian film director (*The Cable, S21-The Khmer Rouge Killing Machine, Rice People* **nominated for the Palm d'Or at Cannes**)

Ly Daravuth, Professor of Art History at the Cambodian Royal University of Fine Arts & co-founder of the Reyum Institute of Cambodian Arts and Culture.

H.E. Nuth Narang, Current member of Cambodian National Assembly and former Cambodian Minister of Culture.

Bertrand Porte, Director of Conservation at the National Museum of Cambodia in Phnom Penh

H.E. Princess Bopha Devi, Cambodian Minister of Culture and patroness of the dance troop of the Cambodian Royal Court

DIRECTOR'S STATEMENT on the BACKGROUND of this project

My first extensive encounter with Cambodians was as a reporter covering Cambodian refugees inside the Thai border in 1987. It was unfeasible for them (or me) to enter their country at that time. Since the opening of the borders in the early 90's there has been a renaissance within Cambodia of scholarship on their history and culture. In recent years I have spent many months spread over multiple trips into Cambodia and have researched it voraciously. But this film is heavily grounded in the work of members of the new wave of Khmer cultural awareness whom I was privileged to interview, including especially the following:

PRODUCTION TEAM

Directed, Produced & Edited by **David Brisbin**

Cambodia Producer - **Eva Tep Bruce**

Cinematography by - **Nils Benson**

Cinematography by - **Nick Wood**.

Score composed by - **Sharon Smith & Brian Kirk**

Original Rap created and performed by - **praCh**

Sound Design by - **Bill Sheppard & DBC Sound**

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REVIEW in FIRECRACKER

Robert Williamson picks out five highlights from the recent 2006 Bangkok International Film Festival....

Nice Hat! 5 Enigmas in the Life of Cambodia

I'm cheating here slightly as this isn't technically an Asian film, though it would surely be of interest to anyone familiar with Southeast Asia. Showing great perception, Canadian filmmaker David Brisbin (actually a production designer with high-profile credits including *In The Cut* and *My Own Private Idaho*) has taken it upon himself to tell the story of Cambodian history and society through the medium of ... hats. Cambodians, it transpires, are obsessed with the things, favouring headgear as diverse as palm leaf boaters, croché bonnets and mass-produced baseball caps. Or, if they are true Khmers, they simply wrap a traditional sheet known as a krama around their heads.

All this is highly charming, but Brisbin's film delves deeper into the historical and ideological baggage of Khmer headgear, considering not only the citizens' hats but also the historical significance of the battle helmets worn in wars throughout the ages and the royal crown, which, it appears, may have been lost during the Pol Pot regime, though such is its cultural significance that no such possibility has ever been officially acknowledged. Filmmaker Rithy Pahn eloquently relates his conflicted feelings about the krama, which, being the traditional Khmer garment, was co-opted as a symbol of the Khmer Rouge and in many people's minds remains tainted by such associations. For such a uniquely and definingly Cambodian item to be tainted in this way offers an otherwise unseen confirmation of the deep and fundamental psychological scars Cambodia has taken so long to overcome.

The film also considers Cambodia's economic outlook by examining the prospects of those working in the hat-making industry, which was initially boosted by globalisation but is now increasingly threatened by it. The film is at its strongest in identifying tensions such as these, though it is important to note that it is by no means pessimistic. Infused with a great love and respect for the Cambodian people, Brisbin's charming and sympathetic film strikes a perfect balance of concern about the past and optimism for the future.

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REVIEW in ORANGE LIFE

Daniel Gibbons writes about writer/producer David Brisbin in the Canadian Magazine "Orange Life" fall 2005 issue

Below the Line

Brisbin is responsible for designing some of the most interesting and original -- if not the most commercially successful -- movies of the last 20 years. His credits include *Drugstore Cowboy*, the film that marked Matt Dillon as the archetype of alternative cool, and *My Own Private Idaho*, a picture almost as famous for its strikingly beautiful design as it is for River Phoenix's best performance. Even the less critically acclaimed films on his Internet Movie Database listing -- the Hughes brothers' *Dead Presidents* and Jane Campion's *In The Cut*, to name two -- have received significant kudos for the way they look.

Brisbin has recently completed his first full-length feature film, a documentary about Cambodia. In it, the motif of the hat is used to trace the history of a country known to outsiders only in fragments (the brutalities of the Khmer Rouge, most likely learned through a couple of viewings of Roland Joffe's *The Killing Fields*, for example). The hat is significant for Brisbin because "it carries such political and cultural baggage, and it's attached to the face" -- the ideal device through which to explain stories about history and culture. The film is called, appropriately enough, *Nice Hat: Five Enigmas in the Life of Cambodia*, and Brisbin is its writer, director and narrator.

Nice Hat sounds impossibly obscure at first, but that's part of the point: through this film, and a planned series of others, Brisbin hopes to challenge our collective ignorance about the part of the world that doesn't fit into the five second sound bites of modern news media.

But it's not obscurity for its own sake. Rather, in the case of Cambodia, there is simply so much to be learned from the times before, during and after the Khmer Rouge, about colonialism and Western foreign policy in the post-colonial world, about the lives of real people rather than the caricatures of poverty or exoticism we occasionally see on TV. As Brisbin says, in this age of globalization "nobody wants to get to know the neighbours."

Watching the film, the lasting impression is one of a commitment to telling a story because it needed to be told, rather than because it is the one that is particularly sellable. From the 12th century temples of Angkor Wat to the killing fields and their aftermath, to modern day hat-makers in Phnom Penh surviving amid fierce competition from Chinese industry, Brisbin's narrative is resolutely about the extent to which Cambodia today originates from a vital and fascinating history, and that this history requires much more than superficial treatment. That the film is eminently watchable and engaging is a tribute to Brisbin's skill at telling a complex story at least as much as it is to the charisma of 16 year old Ven Vern (who likes to call himself James Bond), the on screen narrator for the film's opening chapters.

The highlights of Brisbin's life and career at times read themselves like a movie script, some kind of boy's own adventure. Life as a child in Derry, Northern Ireland, film school at California institute of the Arts, work as a reporter covering the collapse of the Marcos regime in the Philippines. He has also worked in apartheid bound South Africa, poverty stricken Haiti, and militarized Guatemala. All these experiences have contributed to his sense not merely of the world's persistent injustices, but also the humanity that exists among those living in political and economic conditions unknown to most of us in the comfortable West.

As Brisbin puts it: "There is a perception out there of disaster countries. It is dangerous, because it is a depersonalization that puts populations at risk. No country has been relegated more severely to this list than Cambodia. And now, at the moment when it is in regeneration mode, is a time to reconsider the before, during and after."

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from filmmakers who have seen NICE HAT!

"David's doc about Cambodia is told completely thru a social history of hats. Yes, hats. And as the film goes deeper and deeper, both into the hats and into the history, you get shivers at how brilliant hats are as an organizing device, a perfect and completely original lens onto one of the truly most heart-breaking stories ever... in every way, the hats are a device deft enough and subtle enough to contain the enormity of Cambodian history—really!--the most original and witty vantage point imaginable"

JOHN GREYSON

director of 'Proteus' and 'Lilies'

Only the wacky and wooly brain of David Brisbin could conceive of such an artful and insightful and fantastically rich perspective on the history of a place. I wish the world had more like him.

NICE HAT/Amazing Mind/Wonderful Film.

CAROLINE THOMPSON

screenwriter of 'The Secret Garden' & 'Edward Scissorhands'